Pursuing a definition

The following situations must be familiar to you: in a meeting confusion arises and one of the participants proposes to define the key concepts. The rest of the meeting is spent on accomplishing this, but the confusion – and discomfort – only increases. Or a hasty definition is pushed through at the beginning of the meeting, but at some moment one of the participants says, 'Wait a moment, I think our point of departure was not correct'. But the chairman reminds everyone that they did agree with the definition, so he will stick to it. No contributions will be accepted that step outside the borders of the definition. Confusion and frustration take over. So what should we do? Refrain from definitions at all?

Defining concepts is of the greatest importance. But it only works, if the process of defining is not perceived as a preparatory step which needs to be accomplished as quickly as possible. It needs to be the main component itself of the conversation. A definition is the outcome of an inquiry; it is –etymologically speaking – the 'finish', the conclusion, the moment of closing. Such a conversation requires delicate facilitation.

Pursuing a definition is the original form of the Socratic dialogue. Socrates got involved with somebody about a certain issue. After some time it appeared that the other person did not have a clear idea of the key concept of their conversation, whether it was courage, expertise, happiness, love, or whatever. Socrates challenged that person to define this concept. Socrates was convinced that only if one truly understands such a concept one is able to practise it, and vice versa, that if one truly practises it, one is able to define it. But in the dialogues, most of the attempts to define such concepts fail. That is the starting point for a further inquiry, both into what we do in our daily life and into our underlying beliefs.

Approach

1. Choose a concept which requires a definition. Sometimes this happens in the middle of a conversation, but it is also possible to start a conversation for the purpose of defining a specific concept. Choose a concept that is at the heart of the topic under discussion. Make sure that it is a common one that does not require special knowledge of a particular field. It is alright to look up a few definitions, as they may help to focus the inquiry, but this is not necessarily so.

2. Start the inquiry by describing:
   a. concrete examples or personal experiences that fall within the concept;
   b. the meaning the concept has in these examples.
   Participants make their own descriptions.

3. Read the descriptions. Ask, 'What is spot on? What is lacking, confusing or unclear?' Write down what you want to keep in mind for later on in this conversation.

4.   Choose one of the descriptions presented. Review this description by means of the following questions (and make sure that you have concrete examples from daily life at hand; otherwise it will be just a word play):

   a.   is it complete, explicit and accurate?
   b.   does it contain the right words?
   c.   Is it applicable in different situation? Is it in agreement with the daily use of the concept? Check the definition against concrete statements in which the concept is used.
   d.   explore the borders: what does it include and what does it exclude?
   e.   Relate it to concepts that are akin what the difference is.

5.   So what is your definition of the chosen concept? Keep in mind that a good definition is pointed (at the essence) rather than exhaustive.

6.   Return to the beginning, when you chose the concept. What were your reasons for choosing it? Does the definition you have accomplished help you in dealing with that issue?